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From: Carey, Curtis
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New documents show EPA tried to warn Colorado about blowout potential at Gold King Mine

Posted on August 22, 2015 by Bob Berwyn

FRISCO — The EPA knew there was potential for a dangerous blowout at the Gold King Mine at least since the summer of 2014, when the agency issued a Task Order Statement of Work.

In the July 25, 2014, order, the EPA wrote that conditions at the “Gold King Mine present an endangerment to human health and the environment and meet the criteria for initiating a removal action ...”

Just more than a year later, the mine spilled about 3 million gallons of water tainted with arsenic, zinc, manganese, cadmium and lead. Concentrations of some pollutants spiked to many times the level deemed toxic for fish and other aquatic life.

New information about what the EPA was doing when its contractors accidentally breached a rubble dam to trigger the spill are detailed in documents the agency publicly released last week.

The EPA has faced criticism for a lack of timely and transparent communication during the early stages of the spill. For example, the Denver Post reported that the Republican governors of Colorado and Utah — clearly on an EPA witch hunt — alleged that the EPA has withheld information about the mine.

The EPA published the documents in an effort to respond “to concerns and to evaluate impacts to water and sediment that may have been contaminated by the Gold King Mine release,” according to this agency web page. the Denver Post reported that the Republican governors of Colorado and Utah — clearly on an EPA witch hunt, alleged that the EPA has withheld information about the mine.

“Given the experience with the August 5, 2015 blow out from pressurized water at the Gold King Mine, additional work is needed to ensure there are no more blockages holding back water which could contribute to future surges of contaminated water. The EPA and State responders have begun these efforts, but they have not yet been completed,” the agency wrote.

The work that was being done when the water surged out of the mine was aimed at relieving pressure buildup from historic construction operations at the interconnected mines by the previous mining operator. Among other things, the contractors working for the EPA were trying to improve site access, stabilize the mine structure and control water and metals.

The work order also describes previous work done by the Colorado Division of Reclamation, Mining and Safety, including trying to stabilize the existing opening to allow mine water drainage

The work order states that the existing conveyance channel shall be protected and maintained during the work.

“If it becomes necessary to remove these drainage features, then suitable measures must be installed to control flows during the work. A replacement conveyance system is required to be installed after the portal and underground work are completed,” according to the work order.

In a key passage, the work order describes what the EPA had in mind with future work:

“It is proposed to re-open the Gold King Mine portal and workings to investigate the conditions to assess the on-going releases. This will require the incremental de-watering and removal of such blockages to prevent blowouts. The work is intended to take place in September-October, 2014. In addition, the secondary purpose of the work is to attempt to identify and characterize specific water flows into the mine and evaluate potential means to mitigate those flows if possible.”

A key focus of the work was to repair the portal in order to try and control what the EPA knew to be a potentially disastrous surge of polluted water:

“In addition, specify the anticipated approach for removing overburden, debris and re-establishing a safe structure that can be used for entry and egress and secured when not in use. This includes installing a portal gate with a secured locking system ...

“Measures will be taken to control water and metal precipitate sludge and sediment that are impounded behind any blockage at the portal or in the mine. This will include the treatment of surge water discharge as necessary to prevent an uncontrolled release and impact to surface water.”

The EPA also knew that the water at the Gold King Mine would have to be treated at some point:

“A temporary water retention and sludge management pond must be prepared and operated, as necessary, on site to manage mine water and sludge removed from the adit. This will be used to manage impounded mine water and base flows and metal precipitate sludge from the mine workings during the construction activities.”

The second key document released by the EPA is a May 2015 Action/Work Plan which names ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION, LLC as the contractor. The plan outlines the scope of work and the operational approach.

In a background section, the agency once again detailed historic conditions at the mine that likely primed the site for the toxic surge on Aug. 5 this year, clearly recognizing the potential for

a disastrous blowout:

The Gold King Mine has not had maintenance of the mine working since 1991, and the workings have been inaccessible since 1995 when the mine portal collapsed. This condition has likely caused impounding of water behind the collapse. In addition, other collapses within the workings may have occurred creating additional water impounding conditions. Conditions may exist that could result in a blow-out of the blockages and cause a release of large volumes of contaminated mine waters and sediment from inside the mine, which contain concentrated heavy metals.

The Scope of Work section says that the contractor was to remove material covering the adit, which is probably what was being done when the mine spilled its guts.

Read all the EPA's posted documents here: <http://www2.epa.gov/goldkingmine/epa-posts-gold-king-mine-file-documents>

EPA Action/Work Plan

<https://www.scribd.com/doc/275630269/Gold-King-Mine-Action-Work-Plan>